ABUSING *the* AGING

The 107 serious citations issued in a three-year span involved 18 deaths and 30 hospitalizations. Only seven of the citations resulted in criminal charges.

ABBIE DARST | PROGRAM COORDINATOR

An issue affecting between 1 million and 2 million Americans, elder abuse is an under-recognized problem plaguing our society, the consequences of which are devastating and even life threatening to a frail and sometimes defenseless population.

Every day, headlines throughout the United States paint a grim picture of seniors who have been abused, neglected and exploited, often by the people in their lives they trust the most.

There are stories of seniors who have strangled in bed-rail slats because no one checked on them at a nursing facility, or those who have died from infected bed sores that ate through their body from the inside out. Elderly men and women who have lost everything and sit alone, raggedly clothed and suffering because their family stole their money and left them with nothing.

There is no upside to the topic of elder abuse, except the push for growing awareness of the significance and breadth of the problem.

"Abuse, neglect and exploitation are how elder abuse is defined," said Investigator Nikki Henderson with the Kentucky Attorney General's Office of Medicaid Fraud and Abuse Control. "When people hear of abuse, everybody just thinks physical. It is so much more than that. It can be mental abuse or psychological abuse.

"We think about physical because there is something to see," she continued. "Usually when there is physical abuse, there is going to be psychological abuse, too. They are yelling, they are intimidating with that abuse."

The Louisville Metro Police Department's full-time Crimes Against Seniors Unit has seen its fair share of abuse, neglect and exploitation cases. The unit was started in 2000 by then Jefferson County Police Department Chief Bill Carcara, and merged with an existing part-time unit at the Louisville Police Department when the departments merged in 2003.

"We work felonies that happen to folks who are older than the age of 60," said Sgt. Jerry Thornsberry, who is in charge of the Louisville Metro Crimes Against Seniors Unit.